The Pilgrims and Liberty

Society of Colonial Wars in Rhode Island

ADDRESS

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BY

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NINE days ago the parting salute to the memory of the Pilgrims was given at Plymouth. Anything after that must seem faint and colorless indeed. Near the spot selected for the first house of worship, in surroundings bearing names and mementoes of the first years of settlement, with circumstances of a distinguished gathering and orator, the three hundred years of intervening time were rolled back to allow the beginnings to be seen. In the coming twelve months the town as we know it will give large place to a memorial of the original town. Under pious thought and skilful hands, there will arise in stone and bronze reminders of the landing, of the first English immigration into New England, of the native Americans who gave them welcome in broken English, of the lasting motive that has demanded and obtained recognition. Meanwhile the curtain again falls and it was time, for strange liberties are being taken of the seemly occasion. Not content with what poets and writers of fiction have imposed upon their memory, we are promised a book, masquerading as history, purporting to explain the "mystery" of Myles Standish. No one would be more surprised by the announcement than Standish himself. A sumptuous edition of the "Scarlet Letter" is to be issued "in honor" of the Pilgrim celebration. Picture the event, had so much as a copy of a like story been found on one of the Mayflower passengers. Foreign lands have offered an assisting hand. We have had fitting recognition at Old Plymouth, Southampton and Leyden, with much feasting, oratory and placing of memorials. England does not regret having permitted the Mayflower to sail, but some Englishmen are doing their best to recover what may be left of her. Prof. Rendel Harris, for example, claims to have found a beam of the ship in the flooring of an old barn. We have a picture of the interior of a barn, with an indubitable rafter, and under it the kindly features of Professor Harris with a look that can be variously interpreted, from surprise at his great discovery to pleasure at being discovered.

Finally we have Sulgrave Manor, the home of the Washingtons, linked up with the Pilgrims, heaven knows why; and very grave and socially prominent committees, scattering extraordinary history, have dined and journeyed to cultivate a consciousness of the connection and to turn it into cash. There are, apparently, no limits to a properly conducted propaganda. At least England at one time paid closer attention to a Washington than she ever did to the century of souls on the Mayflower. Even Sulgrave Manor is respectable to some of the schemes that have sought to attach themselves to the Tercentenary; but there is evidence that the American public has been "fed up" on the Pilgrims and now begins to poke fun at some features of an overzealous or hysterical effort at canonization of the obvious.

Archbishop Whately once amused himself by proving that the existence of Napoleon could not be admitted as a well-authenticated fact. The same doubt has arisen when reading current tributes to the Pilgrims, in which actions are asserted which are on the face more than improbable; claims are made which are inadmissible, and intentions attributed which could not have arisen at the time and under the circumstances. There has been danger of asking too much of us and of producing a company of those prodigies of excellence which plentifully sprinkle history, to the disadvantage of the subject and the distaste of the reader. Elizabeth's England was prolific of the hero type, of men who thought and did really great things in every branch of human activity. The brilliant accomplishment as illustrated in the written and printed page of the day leaves us gasping with astonishment, and greatness in evil and in good extorts our admiration. The very gorgeousness of the pageant, crowded with the imposing and the immortal, calls for a more restful contrast, and where could that be better sought than in the annals of an English village, somewhat remote from the center of things? Certainly such a contrast could be found in the Scrooby region and its yeoman population.

And from the humblest and most obscure of a territory of less than thirty-six square miles the leaders of the Pilgrim migration came. To clothe even those leaders with perfection and prophetic vision is to manufacture lay-figures for a museum instead of accepting them as human beings, partaking of our faults and therefore capable of serving as models in their better traits.

Strength, soundness of mind and body, a dash of obstinacy, character — do not such qualities acquire merit if well employed?

If there is anything in the theory of selection, that part of the Leyden church which came to New England should stand high. The elimination of the weak and doubting began in England. It is only the stronger and more enterprising who seek new fields or break wholly with the old. It required courage to go contrary to the authorities and the community, to depart from the church of their fathers, to sacrifice home and country and in defiance of law to leave the realm as fugitives. Only a part of the Scrooby congregation turned to Holland, and it was the part of strongest fibre. In Holland, poverty, hard toil, anxieties and disappointments culled out the better fitted to endure — we know nothing of what that process cost. And it was only a part of the Leyden church that came to New England, still tending to a selection of those the more eager to venture, to risk all on the throw of chance, who were mentally forward in desire and physically able to bear hardship. And after all this sifting of material, a sifting that had extended over more than a dozen years, the picked little band reached New Plymouth only to have half of its number consigned to earth before two years had passed. Who can measure by modern standards the cost in life between the flight to Holland and the deadly year in New England?

In another sense it was a picked number, and we always have in mind those coming from the Leyden church, about one-third of the total Mayflower party. At Scrooby, in

Holland and in northern Virginia what names are most intimately associated with every move? Those of Robinson, Brewster, Bradford. This concentrated influence is remarkable and rested upon a unity of thought and purpose notable in itself, more notable in contrast with the other settlements made by Englishmen. We do not trace a break in this strong and dominating agreement. The Leyden congregation had no disputes with their hosts, the Dutch; they had no disputes among themselves. Robinson engaged in a public discussion with Episcopius, but in such a way as to leave no mention of it in contemporary writings, and it was an age of bitter controversy on religious beliefs and practices. Brewster set up as a printer, and his press issued some of the best dogmatic writing of the time; but it left no impress upon Robinson, or upon himself, long the efficient aid of Robinson and destined to take his place in the new settlement with a soul moulded after that of his master. We know that Robinson wrote freely to that part of his flock in the wilderness, letters of advice, comfort and at times mild reproof. It was still a united congregation in spirit.

I do not wish to decry the presence of others. Of Carver too little is known to form an opinion, yet we feel that he might have been a fourth leader. Of Cushman too much is known, and that knowledge does not greatly commend him to us as a disinterested friend or adviser. Winslow was an extremely able man, better equipped by a knowledge of the world than any of his colleagues; but for that very reason his influence was felt rather when worldly considerations were to be met. He was a good agent in business, a diplomat in negotiation and even an arguer on matters of morals where questions of state were also involved. Of Myles Standish and John Alden, those creations of a poet's fancy, little need be said. All these could disappear without decreasing appreciably the general conception of the Plymouth settlement. Yet they are useful as examples. They and the even more obscure freemen bowed to the rule of the leaders,

unquestioning and helpful, giving their silent testimony to the harmony and union of this isolated gathering of English.

Isolation is the only word to apply. Robinson and his followers had stood alone in Scrooby, for their neighbors, good churchmen, saw to that; they stood apart in Holland, separated from the Dutch by language, by inheritance, by that English aloofness which is still a characteristic of the people. In New Plymouth they were more by themselves than ever. With the French at the north they could have no intercourse; with the Dutch at New Netherland they could have trade relations, but that involved no closer intimacy than they maintained with the annual fishing vessels coming to the coast of Maine. Virginia and the West Indies, where their own people could be found, were too distant to permit frequent intercourse, and further, both islands and main were royalist and Church of England — bars to closer ties. The Indians, an occasional lawless free-trader and an even more occasional visit of a passing vessel gave them all the intercourse they had. Even ships coming from England did not bring welcome news, or John Robinson, or more than a small part of the Leyden church. Shut in by the weakness of their numbers and position, closely held together by their economic needs, they recognized to the full the leadership of a few, to whom they entrusted the relations with their English creditors, the management of the fur trade, the acquisition of new lands, and whatever was demanded for defence. This isolation and union must have reacted on the settlers. In the far east solitude, a residence in the desert with fasting and vigil, turns out a prophet or a madman. For nine full years Plymouth was without a neighboring settlement — more than sufficient time to mellow and ripen the originally good stock.

In carrying the story thus far we have seen that three men were responsible for what was done in the migration — John Robinson, William Brewster and William Bradford.

But is not that list excessive? William Bradford was a boy when Scrooby congregation was formed, and all his training for his future work was under Robinson and Brewster. He was wholly a product of their teaching and example. Brewster himself had been in Holland with Mr. Secretary Davison, who was held answerable by his uncertain mistress, Queen Elizabeth, for the execution of Mary Queen of Scots. Brewster either suffered by this connection or he recognized that he was ill fitted for public affairs. His university tastes came back to him, he retired to Scrooby where there was no opening for advancement, and gathered his fellow separatists into a communion which encouraged his studies while it effectually closed the door to public recognition. Receptive, yet undervaluing his own abilities, he sat under Clyfton and Robinson, with a humble and passive mind. There is no record of his teaching before the migration, so he too may be regarded as a product of Robinson. As for Robinson himself he was assistant to Clyfton and, a younger man, took the impress of the older. Clyfton was one of a number of sufferers for faith in that day, converting many to God, says Bradford, by his faithful and painful ministry. So that coming to the source of influence we find that the separatist church of Scrooby, Leyden and New Plymouth was but a cupful drawn from a common reservoir. The leaders were unlike their fellows only in their greater enterprise, which brought a part of this congregation across the ocean.

Was there not more than a trace of monachism in this? Wherever found, in Asia as well as in Europe, monachism is the same — the pursuit of some ideal of life which society cannot supply, but which is thought attainable by abnegation of self and withdrawal from the world. Weary with the toils of life, unequal to its problems and intent upon an undisturbed enjoyment of their own belief and practices, the Pilgrims turned away from Europe and took a chance with fortune. If not the vows there was the actual presence of poverty, chastity and obedience. In retiring from the

old world they entered upon a new, and for nearly ten years they lived their almost monkish existence. Worldly wise they were not, for they received a check at every turn. Under pressure of their debts they established a fishing stage on Cape Anne and a trading house on the Penobscot. They were fleeced by their English creditors, cheated at the trading house and driven from the fishing stage. They were weak in the face of interested opposition. They could not suppress Morton at Merrymount; Endecott did it for them; they were unable to defend their Penobscot station against the French, and lost it to Massachusetts Bay. Offering a share in the Connecticut River territory to their stronger neighbor, they saw with grief that Massachusetts had set out to get the whole. Whenever they came into contact with the world they were unable to uphold their just claims, and suffered from the want of fairness in others. The direct and almost perfect design of their first years became blurred in the strong and interfering lights of rivals, and by the passing of their leaders. Robinson died in 1625, and Brewster in 1643. Of the great trio Bradford alone remained. New Plymouth ceases to be a factor in the colonizing of Massachusetts, and though maintaining a separate political existence, is absorbed in the Confederation of New England Plantations in 1643. Thenceforward she is the handmaiden of arrogant and rapidly growing Massachusetts Bay. The policy of isolation had broken down in practice.

Can it be claimed for them that they were ever conscious of having a mission? That they were enlightened leaders in empire and in democracy? Why gild the gold of their homely severity or streak their sacrifice with flaunting colors? Is it not enough to select and mark the quality by which they have contributed more than all other colonizing nations can show in America? They had adopted a church in which one Christian was as good as another; they were therefore democrats — self-governing. They brought with them English institutions — the best, for they gave the opportunity to

own land without the drag of feudal restrictions and the right to enjoy the fruits of their own labor. They pinned the frontier of England to Massachusetts as it had already been stretched across the sea to Jamestown. From those two points that frontier — now American — has been carried to the Pacific, bearing with it the restless energy and unsatisfied longings of the pioneer, a pressure that has vivified our history. Compare this record with that of France and Spain in America, each of which opened and lost an empire. Was not the democracy of New Plymouth and Jamestown potent in working this miracle? But that democracy went back into the heart of English history. In a virgin soil it took new root and improved on its original. The plant carried the seed of immortality.

Is it not evident that what we regard in the Pilgrims is an example, an influence, not men? Clyfton, Robinson, Brewster and Bradford are but convenient names on which to hang our judgments. Fine characters and leaders as they were, they were the agents through whom the active principle wrought. There was no fervid ardor here, none of the fire-tipped tongue to arouse and sway a people. Peter the Hermit — it would be absurd to look for his like under the Tudors or Stuarts. Under the movement that tore the Scrooby congregation from its original setting and flung it on the shores of Massachusetts there was something primal, the commanding force that compels extraordinary actions often through unpromising agents. A matter of conscience, it was more a question of freedom.

And the same question is constantly confronting us in many forms. A century and a half after the landing one George Washington came to represent the problem of that day — a commonplace man in thought, a meritorious colonial product of whom in ordinary times one would have looked for safe not great things. He met every call upon his ability; in homely phrase he expressed the heart of the controversy with the mother country, embodied it, trained an

army, fought no great battle, won and left the country secure under a constitution which he only could have imposed on a half-reluctant people. Freedom in union was gained through him, and we marvel at the instrument without abating one iota our admiration of his real greatness of character. Again is it not a principle we recognize and find the name a convenience? Was it not a question of freedom?

Nearly a century later there came from the middle West one of the most uncouth men ever recognized in public honors. We placed him in the Presidential chair, we loaded him with responsibilities and we drenched him with ridicule. After four years' trial we renewed his cares and anxieties in a campaign that turned on a phrase — about swapping horses in midstream — and continued to fling abuse and criticism at him, until by the flash of an assassin's pistol we saw true. And out of the darkness of that hour there came a nation's hero. One who had been a critic wrote with true insight three days after the second inaugural address: "That rail-splitting lawyer is one of the wonders of the day. Once at Gettysburg and now again on a greater occasion he has shown a capacity for rising to the demands of the hour which we should not expect from orators or men of the schools. This inaugural strikes me in its grand simplicity and directness as being for all time the historical keynote of this war; in it a people seemed to speak in the sublimely simple utterance of ruder times." Could praise go further? An Englishman has told the story after careful study of this doubly uncouth character, first because of the unrestricted ridicule and secondly by the equally unrestrained praise, and with a touch of that insular prejudice that makes the presence of an Englishman known and felt rather than beloved. He has placed Lincoln very much where we would wish to have him placed. Again is it not a principle we recognize and find the name a convenience? Was it not a question of freedom?

Fortunate the nation which has such heroes, expressive of

its highest aspirations. Happy the people who will accept such, conscious that each has marked an advance not only in their own freedom but in the freedom of the world. In the one case an end was put to colonial dependence; in the other, the immorality of slave labor was demonstrated beyond recall. The world of 1775 was a little world, but the lesson applied to new as well as to old continents. In 1865 a wider world saw what a people could do when stirred by a righteous revolt against a social system which had become a bar upon progress. In both there was something basic, primal, that goes back of all human record into the night of history.

The lesson is obvious. No individual can withdraw from his fellows and stand alone. He dies or becomes an incumbrance on the wheels of social progress. No people can stand apart and claim that they are remote from or have no concern for others. The world, old and new, has been banded together by science, and as never before by interest, engulfed in a common misfortune. If what is called civilization is to be saved it can only be done under union and freedom. There is no place on earth in which a refuge from the storm can be sought, as did the Pilgrims; to renounce association in their spirit would be desperate, a cowardly and monstrous error. We must take our shares of evil and of good, of responsibilities as well as of benefits, costly as both must be. America first! Yes. First in right, first in freedom, and first freely and in a self-sacrificing spirit to share those blessings with her colleagues of the world.